

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

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4 April 1984

South Korea: Seoul's Campus Strategy ☐

Summary

Concurrent with lifting restrictions on formerly banned politicians, Seoul is lowering its security profile on university campuses. Its goal is to reduce tensions prior to assembly elections to be held in late 1984 or early 1985. Liberalization on the campuses is a risky move. Isolated instances of campus violence have taken place this semester and the universities cannot manage major outbreaks. The government's new approach will be tested during the traditional campus rallying period in late April and the papal visit in early May. Should sizeable offcampus demonstrations take place, we believe Seoul will quickly reimpose tight controls. ☐

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**APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: APR 2002**

EA M #84-10082

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The Recent Steps

Within the past three months, Seoul has:

- Released over 350 students imprisoned since President Chun consolidated his power in May 1980.
- Permitted more than 1,000 students who had been expelled from university for political activity to reapply for admission.
- Removed uniformed police from the campuses and made their return contingent on the request of university officials.
- Allowed students to form committees to discuss these changes. []

By pulling back the police, the government is removing a key source of tension. [] however, the number of undercover agents on campus has increased, and this could cause tensions to develop anew. Indeed, in an incident in late March students on one Seoul campus spotted and briefly held captive one such undercover agent before releasing him. These undercover agents have been placed on campuses to monitor student activities rather than to intervene, as the police had done. The government has thus shifted the burden of keeping students in line to university officials, who are now responsible for deciding when to ask for police intervention. []

Motivations

The civilian bureaucracy, including the Agency for National Security Planning (NSP, formerly KCIA), has been the driving force behind these "liberalizing" moves. []

[] President Chun agreed uniformed police on the campuses were unnecessarily provocative. Their removal was seen as depriving the more radical student activists of one of their major causes. []

[] claim that the government recognizes the need for political--as well as economic--liberalization if it is to maintain stability. They assert [] that Seoul recognizes that legitimate grievances exist. They say the government is prepared to allow freer discussion and even dissent among students. [] outlined a phased liberalization that, if continued, would eventually permit more open criticism of the government both on campus and among the population in general. []

Although authorities in Seoul are anxious to defuse major sources of tension, we believe these steps are also part of a broader attempt to keep relations with Washington on an even keel, particularly during a US Presidential election year. []

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Perspective

Chun and his civilian advisers recognize the risks involved in easing restrictions on the campuses, and there are definite limits to their tolerance. Already Seoul has resisted student efforts to broaden their discussions about campus policies by dissuading organizers from holding a public forum on the return of expelled students. []

The success of Seoul's campus strategy will depend on the actions of the more radical students. The vast majority of students are moderate and not politically involved. Expelled students returning to the campuses this month, however, include many whose experiences in and out of jail over the past decade have radicalized them. Such individuals, often well into their thirties, have little to lose: their reputation as troublemakers already has closed the door to good careers in government and private industry. For these students, the issue is President Chun himself. An umbrella group representing expelled students--the Youth Federation for Democracy Movement--is particularly combative. []

Many university officials doubt they can control the students. By mid March, a small but violent campus incident had occurred in Seoul and one took place in the southern city of Kwangju. In Kwangju, radical students attempted to disrupt student elections, and in Seoul they harassed cameramen covering student activity. The melee in Kwangju injured 10 people, including one professor seriously. The government's policy of inducting troublemakers into the military could become the next focus of campus agitators. []

More critical tests of the new campus policies will come on 19 April, the anniversary of the student riots that helped topple Syngman Rhee in 1960, and in early May, when Pope John Paul II visits South Korea. The authorities are concerned that students will use these occasions to publicize their grievances. []

Should violent demonstrations proliferate and move off the campuses, we believe Seoul will reimpose direct controls. At a minimum, the government would return uniformed police to the campuses; in a worst case, it could resort to martial law. Seoul probably would justify return to stricter controls by pointing out that it had attempted to liberalize but had not been met

halfway by the students. []

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are saying [] that the government plans to use campus violence as an excuse to reimpose martial law. The government would then be better able to control all political activity in the period leading up to the National Assembly elections, [] [] [] The Assembly elections are scheduled to take place no later than March 1985 but could occur as early as autumn 1984. We still believe martial law is only an outside possibility; Seoul is likely to revert to less harsh controls that so far have made student dissidence a nagging but manageable problem. []